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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

The First of the Six Sense Organs: The Eyes From Defilement to Purity

(Lectures by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, Chapter 3, given on November 2, 1986 and November 9, 1986.)

In previous chapters of the sutra the Buddha has spoken about the five skandhas, or aggregates. He has shown that these skandhas have no real existence, yet they are not separate from reality.

From the third chapter onward, the Buddha begins to talk about the six entries, the twelve positions, and the eighteen realms. These comprise the material and mental worlds. The Buddha addresses the question of whether or not these worlds have real existence.

The six entries are sometimes called the six sense organs or the six kinds of sense organ roots. The six entries are the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. Why are they called entries? It is because these sense organs are the source of all of our problems. If these sense organs were closed, we would have no problems. As long as we have a body, we have these six sense organs, and as long as we have them, we have problems. Problems lead to vexation; vexation leads to suffering. All sentient beings wish to be free from suffering.

Why don't we just get rid of our sense organs, if they are the source of our problems? Wouldn't this make sense? Of course not. We cannot remove our senses, but we must use our eyes, our ears, and all of our six sense organs in the right way, the proper way. They will still be entries, but they should cease to be entries of vexation so that they will become entries of wisdom. They should no longer be entries of evil karma, but rather entries of merit and virtue. If we can bring this about, we will continue to use our sense organs, but we will turn away from the path of vexation and onto the path of practice. You can change your suffering and turn it into great merit and wisdom.

Thus the sutras say, "If your sense organs are not pure, vexations will arise." Put in another way: "If you have vexations, it is because your sense organs are not pure. They are defiled."

When your sense organs are pure and undefiled, liberation will follow. When your sense organs are impure, vexations arise.

To purify and clean your sense organs is to reduce your vexations.

If there is someone you hate or with whom you're angry, ask yourself, "What is it about this person that I don't like?" Can the problem be

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reduced to a particular sense organ or a combination of sense organs? Is it the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind, or all of them together? Few people would cause distress to all of your six sense organs. Vexation in only two or three of the entries will be sufficiently annoying.

At the end of a retreat sometime ago in Taiwan, someone came up to me and told me that the retreat had been very helpful. "But," he said, "I hope with all my heart that Mr. So-And-So and I will never be together on the same retreat again. Next time he comes, I'm staying home."

I said, "You must have a long-standing feud with him. What was it he did to you that brings out such great resentment?"

He said, "This was the first time I ever laid eyes on him. He never did anything to me. It's just that I had the misfortune to sit next to him and sleep near him. During the day his body odor drove me crazy. At night his snoring kept me awake."

These vexations came in through the nose and the ears.

How is the problem of the six entries approached in Ch'an? There are successive stages that you must pass through. First, you must learn to close all of your sense organs. Later, you will be able to open your sense organs, but at this stage they will no longer be used to make differentiations or distinctions. The six sense organs will receive everything and yet remain undefiled. Only when you have reached this point are the six sense organs considered to be completely pure.

How can we close the sense organs? Suppose you see a beautiful woman or an attractive man, and suppose that this sight creates vexations in you. Simply close your eyes for a moment. Or if there are places where very attractive people congregate and this distracts you, simply avoid those places if

you can. If you don't let your eye be defiled, that will lead to cleanliness and purity.

We are often misled by our eyes. For example, when we eat, we only want to eat very clean food. We don't want to touch food that has fallen on the ground; we look at it and call it dirty. But if you really think about all the processes that the food we eat goes through and all the hands that touch it, you will see that it is not very different from food that has fallen on the ground. Because you don't see all the places that your food has been before you eat and all of the things that are really on it, you think it's clean. What you don't see, taste, touch, feel or think will not affect the cleanliness or purity of your sense organs.

The eye and the ear are the worst offenders. Taste and smell do not really bring much trouble. But there is the problem of the mind. If a thought or an idea makes you unhappy, it is best not to dwell on it. If your mind is too active, one statement by another person will cause you to jump to conclusions and will create trouble. However, if you don't let yourself understand the implications of what's being said, or if you consider the other person's perspective, you will not be bothered.

There are too many things in this world that cause suffering through the eye and the ear. We can reduce these vexations of the entries to sense organs by not allowing the mind to dwell on what is seen or heard.

Eventually, your practice will reach a point where you can keep your sense organs open. You will then look at everything without seeing anything; listen to everything and hear nothing. Perhaps this is not the best way of putting it. Although you see everything, it is really your eyes that see, it is not you. It is your ears that hear sound; it is not you. Each sense organ has sensations, but they have nothing to do with you. Your sense organs still function perfectly. If someone slaps you, you recognize that you are being slapped. You have

a sensation that something is hitting something, but you are not being hit. In fact, whatever happens will have nothing to do with you.

Patrick, how would it be if you came up here and I slapped you? Would you just say, "No, that wasn't me who was hit"? You don't understand? Well, in that case there's no need for you to come up.

The important thing is your mental state. If someone slaps you and you slap him back, but there is no disturbance in your mind, then you haven't been hit and you haven't hit anyone. If someone slaps you and you immediately become upset and angry and hit back, then you have been hit and you have hit someone else.

Now I will talk about each of the six entries. The eyes first. The sutra says that there is no such thing as seeing. Ordinary people believe what they see is real. They associate seeing with what is seen or with that which sees, and they take this to be real. If they see something they perceive as beautiful, they will want to look again. They will turn away from something ugly. But the Surangama Sutra states that there is no such thing as seeing.

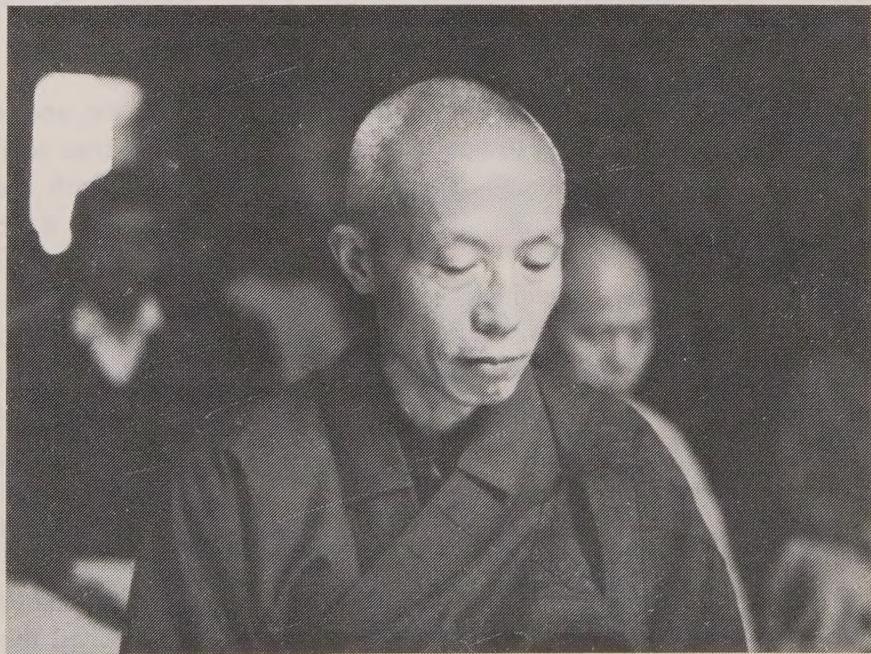
You may believe what you see is real, but when you are tired, or if you stare at a certain point for a long period of time, your eyes tire and you may begin to see things. Your eyes see what really isn't there. Ordinary people will admit that what they see under these circumstances is probably unreal. But if they are awake, they take what is seen to be real. The sutra shows that what is seen brings forth innumerable feelings and emotions: anger, happiness, sadness, joy. Your mind is directly affected by what you

see. You may think what you see is real, but your sight is really no different from that of a person with tired eyes.

For example, you may dislike people with round faces. Someone else may dislike people with long faces. Most people cannot give coherent reasons for their likes and dislikes. Impressions come from books, discussions, common prejudice, your imagination, and likes and dislikes are slowly built. There is nothing rational about the process. No one decides, "Yes, logic shows that round faces are all bad," or "I have determined that long faces are unpleasant." Rather, there seems to be an intrinsic affection or disaffection for such characteristics.

To have such built-in bias means that your eyes do not function well. They are starry and hazy. This does not happen over night. We are born with hazy, clouded eyes. Only when you are enlightened do your eyes function clearly.

The sutra says that our eyes are tired. And because we are tired and have vexations, we cannot see our own nature clearly. This is not true seeing.



The sutra explains that there must be three components present in order for us to see: the dual conditions of light and darkness, the sense organ of the eye, and space. Without any one of these three, seeing does not occur.

The first component of seeing is the condition of light and darkness. We cannot see without light, but without darkness—something to obstruct light—we cannot see either. Light and darkness must coexist in order for seeing to occur. The problem is that light and darkness are intrinsically opposites. How can they exist together?

According to the sutra, we cannot hold onto the idea that it is light and darkness that allows us to see. We must understand that the kind of seeing that common sense refers to is really the seeing of hazy eyes. The sutra explains that we live in an illusory state. Because of our vexations we don't see things as they really are. Note that the sutra doesn't speak against common sense or the phenomenal world, nor does it object to our impression of light and darkness. The sutra simply points out that if we try to hold onto what we see as real, this can lead to vexation.

The second component of seeing is the eye. The eye alone is not sufficient to enable us to see. In a dark room, for example, what do we see? We may say that we see "black," but that is only because we have a memory of light; it is not really what we see at that moment. It is just another illusion.

The third component of seeing is spatial relationship. Common sense tells us that we need space between objects and in front of our eyes in order to see. But this, also, does not hold true. For example, I'm short-sighted and must wear glasses. In order to read I must hold a book at a certain distance. If I take off my glasses, I have to bring it closer to my eyes. Because of these different spatial relationships I can see. Without space it is not possible to see, and yet again, this doesn't mean that WITH space we can see.

Thus our seeing is erected upon a foundation of illusions. What we see is at best a distortion. So we should not be too attached to anything we see. Our eyes are the primary source of all our vexations.

We apply inconsistent criteria to what we see and what we consider beautiful. The French sculptor Rodin, for instance, created a famous statue called "The Thinker". It is widely praised by art critics. In China there is a set of statues of four Vajra Kings with bulging muscles that is considered a masterpiece. In some African cultures, woodcarvings represent women with long, slender upper bodies, big bellies and short legs, and these are considered by the native populations to be ideals of beauty. What are the true, unchanging criteria of beauty? These criteria are manmade, human, and variable. There are no absolute standards.

We usually talk about truth, good, and beauty as if they really exist. Truth belongs to philosophy, virtue to religion—at least worldly religion—and beauty to art. Buddhism is not against truth, good or beauty. But there is a need to be free from attachments to these concepts. In a state of liberation it is irrelevant to speak of things as true or not true, virtuous or not virtuous, beautiful or not beautiful.

If we see, and yet it is as if we haven't seen at all, this is true seeing. It is only this state that is in accord with the true nature of the Tathagatagarbha. In it we see everything, and yet there is no emotional response of love or hatred, or discrimination into beauty or ugliness. There are no distinctions; everything is seen as equal. This is the True Suchness of the Tathagatagarbha, which is also called the purity of the sense organ of the eye.

Thus, if you see things that you particularly don't like, or people you particularly dislike, or if you see things or people that particularly interest you, then how pure and undefiled are your eyes? If we have not reached the point where the sense organ of

the eye is pure, then what we see can lead to vexation. We must then use the teachings of the sutra to help us overcome our attachments. We can use the dialectic of the sutra to remind ourselves that whatever we see (the combination of light and darkness, the organ of sight, and the spatial relationship) is illusory. There is ultimately no reason to be attached to what we see.

About a year ago a college girl came to see me for advice on a personal matter. She had seen a man at a party and couldn't get him out of her mind. Her friends arranged a meeting with him. They became friends, but he showed no particular interest in her. She was upset, yet she was too shy to take the initiative. She asked me if there might be some karmic affinity because she was obsessed by him. I said, "If there were really some close affinity from a previous life, then the first time he saw you he should have felt the same way you felt. But if only you felt it and he didn't, then it seems like it is nothing more than your own karmic vexation." She asked me what to do, because she was having trouble concentrating on her studies. She was doing poorly in school, and she couldn't find any meaning in life. What would you tell her?

I told her to try to concentrate on her schoolwork and nothing else. If that didn't work, I told her to ask herself, "What did I see? What was it that made me feel this way?" She must realize that what she is seeing is just a false image; it is not the true person. But she objected, "What I saw was a real person."

I said, "Well, you were in an emotional state; this guy happened to be around and your karmic obstruction manifested in him. You should try to see him clearly; what he really is might not be worth spending so much time and emotion on." Then she said, "It makes sense but I still can't get rid of this feeling I have for him. What should I do?" "In that case," I replied, "don't be so shy. Just go up to him and ask, 'Do you love me or not?'" She said, "If I do that, he may look down on me and refuse to have anything more to do with me." I said, "Well, that's the best solution I have to offer."

Any problems you might have—just come to me. I have plenty of solutions like this. But you'll do better to practice. This will be the best solution.



Center News

- On June 18 we went to Sagamore Hill and Belmont Lake Park in Long Island for our Annual Picnic. We had lots of food, fun, and games, and lots of laughs. Shih-fu gave a short Dharma talk after lunch break, and then we caught him feeding the ducks! It was an enjoyable day.



- We had our 1989 Annual Membership Meeting on June 25. Twenty-eight regular members attended. The Directors' reports showed that 1988-89 was a year of considerable growth for the Center. Our regular activities now include monthly beginner's meditation class, a one-day sitting, a one-day recitation of Buddha's name, and regular Sunday lectures by Shih-fu or guest speakers. Sunday attendance has grown rapidly since the schedule was changed to adjust for a longer morning sitting time: from 10:00 to 11:30. We hope to continually expand to meet the needs of our members. We would like the people who come to our Center to be able to gain the benefits of the Dharma and to have the opportunity to practice.
- One of our biggest projects this year is the purchase of the house behind the Center. Some renovation will be required to meet our needs. We welcome your support—either through financial contributions or donation of your time.



• • • • • Marriages:

• Shih-fu presided over the wedding ceremony of Xue-sung Wang and Yuru Wu on June 22. They are both students at Harvard University and enthusiastic supporters of our Center.

• Congratulations to Karen Zinn and Ernest Heau on their wedding on July 1.



- Shih-fu left for Taiwan on July 10. He will be back in New York on November 1. In the interim, Rev. Jen Jin and Professor Li will be our guest lecturers on alternate Sundays.

Coming-up in August and September:

- On August 12 we will have a one-day recitation of the Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva, Ksitigarba.
- There will be a three-day meditation retreat, from September 1, 8:00 p.m. to September 4, 9:00 p.m. You may participate on only part of this retreat. Please call for more information.
- Beginner's Meditation Classes will be on Wednesdays from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Each course consists of four evenings:

August 9, 16, 23 and 30
 September 6, 13, 20 and 27

Our telephone number is (718) 592-6593. Please call to register.

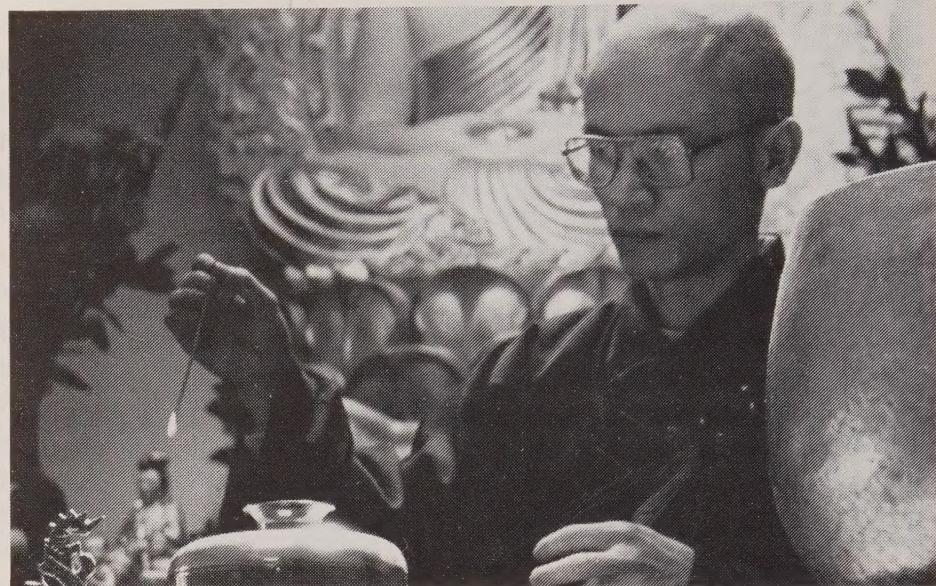
- On Sunday, July 9, the Ch'an Center held its first Bargain Bazaar to raise funds for the new house. This event was mainly organized by Jeffrey and Lily Kung. There were many items for sale: furniture, clothing, stationery, cosmetics, jewelry, and small gifts. A lot of people came to help out, and they brought lots of merchandise. It was so successful and so much fun that we would like to have another one later in the summer.

A Dream

Different
 intricate patterns
 of lines,
 images of moving objects,
 people,
 places . . .
 some linger on;
 others vanish;
 at times,
 imprints
 deep in our subconsciousness;
 time passes by;
 memories . . .
 a past dream,
 a real story,
 once happened . . .
 life,
 a dream
 in another dream;
 shadows flash by . . .
 a mirror.

Paul Truong 2.17.84

We are great saddened by the accidental death of our Dharma brother Paul Truong on July 6 in Toronto, Canada. He was the pioneering spirit that helped found and later support the Toronto Buddhist Society. He first met Shih-fu in 1977 in Toronto, and came to New York for his first retreat in 1982. After that, he attended three out of every four retreats each year. He was instrumental in bringing most of our Canadian members to hear Shih-fu's teaching here in New York, including Guo Yuen Shih, his brother, and Trish Ing, who are now residents of the Center. In 1988 he took the novice ordination for monkhood in Taiwan, and he came to stay in New York until illness caused him to return to Canada in May of this year. Although we will continue to miss him, we feel confident that he will fulfill his wish to propagate Buddhadharma in the next life.



Paul Truong 1944-1989

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